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## THE TEACHING OF MODERN LANGUAGES UNDER PRESENT CONDITIONS.

THE teaching of foreign languages has always been a vexing problem of the schools. One could make this statement, with the same degree of truth, regarding the teaching of languages in general, not excluding the mother-tongue and the classic Greek and Latin.

Toward the latter two the world has, however, taken an attitude of resignation and is willing to go on studying, without the faintest hope of ever learning them, simply because five centuries of routine have made of them the basis of higher education, and because the study of Greek and Latin constitutes a distinction—though artificial and false—between the educated and the uneducated.

There is something pathetic in the cowardly yielding of whole nations and generations to the classical phantom, but men's craving for distinctions once admitted, the particular means which they choose to mark them are of little importance. Although it is not sure that such social differences should be abolished, it is desirable and good from time to time to say that they are nothing but signs of a weakness inherent in human nature.

A friend of the writer once stated the position and value of Greek and Latin wittily and truly: "They are," he said, "like the two buttons we wear on our coats, behind. These buttons are now useless, and few men know or care to know why they happen to be there. Yet, cut yours off and every one will notice and comment upon it. And inasmuch as for the average mind it is always painful to be an object of comment, we go on wearing buttons without buttonholes and really there is in it no great harm." We must be tolerant, and the writer is quite willing that the two classical buttons should continue to hang on our educational coat until they happen to drop off.

Our schools, colleges, and universities teach, however, or

pretend to teach, other languages, living ones ; and they do so for another reason than that which makes them lose so much valuable time on Greek and Latin. They teach French, German, Italian, etc., because the knowledge of these languages today is as indispensable as writing and reckoning, and because public opinion, and rightly so, demands that they be taught.

And now what happens? In answer to this question it would be easy for a Voltaire to write a few pages of that marvelous prose full of sparkling wit and burning sarcasm by which he attacked the ignorance and the hypocrisy of his own time. But not being Voltaire, and, on the other hand, writing for people who know full well the evil and are honestly trying to correct it, the writer only wishes to submit here, not a panacea, but a few suggestions, and to contribute, in an humble measure, to the solution of the problem.

The fundamental error in language-teaching lies in the attitude generally prevailing in the class-room. Language is not a science, but an art, and must be approached, taught, and learned as such. The writer knows that in final analysis there is little difference between art and science, that there is a supreme point where they meet and merge. To illustrate this, the famous cupola of St. Peter's might serve as an example. It was only through repeated attempts and numerous corrections that Buonarroti succeeded in finding the ideal curve which is one of the triumphs of human genius. After the artist came the scientists. They measured, calculated, and finally proved by  $a + b$  that the marvelous line is, at the same time, the one which gives the greatest strength. In this case art and science reached the meeting-point, but by different paths ; and it is with these different paths in mind that we speak of art and science. Among many other instances Musset's poetry is a most striking one: he applied psychology and invented its terminology long before that new science, which is still in its infancy, was born. Art, then, precedes science. It has its source in the innermost fibers of the human soul. It is intuitive, final, infallible, and eternal. It is a gift of God. Science is conscious, provisional, ephemeral, and subject to corrections. Where is the science of

the sixteenth century? With all their science and their figures, would a thousand scientists working together for a thousand years have found the curve of St. Peter's dome, and despite their *proof*, is there no other line which would give as much or more strength to the edifice? Who dares to say that there is none, and, on the other hand, who can conceive of one more perfect?

The artist is pregnant with an idea or a vision, and his purpose is to express it in a material form. The expression is seldom adequate, but that is because our means of expression are insufficient. This limitation does not prevent the artist from continuing his work. On the contrary, it incites him and gives him increased power in his noble struggle with form. Were he pusillanimous enough to wait until his means of expression were equal to his conception, or foolish enough to look for set rules by which he might realize his ideal, he would never work, but would remain useless all his life. Ask any great artist how he does things, and he will laugh at you or perhaps worse. He purely and simply does his work, and it amazes him to read the learned article of the learned "person" telling the world how and why he did it. It is easy for Boileau to write his *Art poétique* after reading the works of his illustrious friends. Corneille is tiresome and little only when he tries to explain what a tragedy should be. Any Master of Arts can tell you how a novel should be constructed, and how the ideal sonnet must be handled. The too numerous art and literary critics all gain money and fame informing the public why this work and that are great. Did ever one of these nauseous pontiffs teach a man how to write or to paint? Is all of Ruskin's sententious rubbish worth the meanest of Whistler's sketches? Did ever a grammarian teach a man to speak? Did all the professors of style and literature ever produce a poet? And how many have they killed?

To do things is the alpha and omega of art. And if speaking and writing a language is an art, the only way to acquire it is to speak and write it, not to talk about it. If a man wants to learn how to draw, the master puts before him a sheet of paper, in his hand a pencil, and makes him draw some simple object—a cup, an inkstand, or a potato. He does not

lecture to him on the industry of paper making, or the history of art; nor need he mention who invented oil-painting, or in what year Leonardo da Vinci painted the Joconde, who was the girl sitting as his model, or what make of brushes and colors he used on that occasion.

Things of equal relative value form the bulk of language-teaching in our best institutions. Nothing but talk about the language to be studied. The language itself is completely absent from the lesson. Generally, in addition to grammar, translation is resorted to. They call it composition, but it is translation notwithstanding, and is to language study what the printed model is to drawing.

It is unnecessary to insist upon the result. The tree is to be judged by the fruit, and this tree is as barren as a telegraph pole.

What, then, shall take its place? This question is extremely difficult to answer, as nothing is harder to describe than how to do a thing. You might as well lay down rules to win battles. Even the minutest recipe for cooking a certain dish can be followed only by a born cook. And this leads us to the very heart of the whole difficulty the question of the teacher. Tell me who the teacher is, and I shall tell you what the lesson is. Like poets, great teachers are born, and it is doubtful whether they are born in larger numbers. Counting half a dozen in one generation for every nation is a liberal supposition. But unlike poets, or at least more easily than poets, teachers can be made; otherwise pedagogy is a farce, and we would do well to close our normal schools. As old Montaigne puts it, take a man with "his head well made rather than well filled"—that is to say, a man with common-sense—inspire him, do not overburden him with work, so that he may find time to think on what he is doing, and give him a free hand. After some experience—for experience is as necessary to the teacher as it is to the carpenter—he will discover the true principles, though not in all cases carried out by the same method or means. The latter he will select according to his temperament, immediate needs, and the material on which he is working. In no case will he fall into routine and idle talk; and success will be his reward. He will, however,

have to work for it and work hard. The teacher's is no easy task. A man who teaches two hours a day needs no further physical exercise. All he requires is rest so as to be fresh again the next day, for teaching is an eternal recommencement. Sisyphus's rock is the teacher's work symbol. And for all that he will receive, if he is lucky, from a thousand to two thousand dollars a year—less than a good coachman! The problem of teaching language, like the whole school question, is chiefly a financial one. Money buys everything, even good teachers.

Excellent handbooks have been published which can serve as a guidance for the teacher and as a memento for the student. But that is the limit of their usefulness. No book, even if it were of divine inspiration, can lead to success in language-teaching, if the instructor is not the soul of the lesson. A teacher who is willing to be the mere commentator of a book, to hide behind it, as it were, is not worthy of his calling. Rousseau wanted to banish every book from the schoolroom, and if such an extreme measure does not seem advisable, it is only because few teachers reach the high point of skill and power where one can dispense with help.

It is from the teacher's lips that the student must receive every new notion. This notion, perceived at the beginning by the eye, is then registered in the shape of language by the ear and not the eye. That is to say, the teacher of French, for instance, first *shows* the objects or the facts and clads them, *viva voce*, with the French words which represent them, without considering either the written language or the pupil's vernacular. Later on, the written language is introduced; the student then reads and writes it as naturally and as easily as he does his own.

Translation should always be rigorously avoided. Translation is not, and cannot be, a means of studying a language efficiently. Experience has shown it, and reason proves it. In order to translate one language into another, common sense tells us that one should know both languages. Access to a hundred dictionaries makes no difference. The study of one's own dictionary is a most interesting and profitable occupation for a man like Théophile Gautier, to whose mind each word brings a com-

plete image, and who thus enriches his vocabulary. But how can we expect a student to choose among the half-dozen French words he finds for every English word, and *vice versa*?

Since our ideas are infinitely more numerous than our words, each language is compelled to extend or multiply the meaning of the individual word, or, in other terms, to resort to figures and metaphors, which has caused it to be said that a language is but a collection of metaphors. Take, for instance, the word "operation." It means a different thing as you speak of a surgeon, a banker, a general, or a mathematician. "Whitewash" is another thing in politics than in the building industry. Now, nobody will be surprised to hear that each language extends and multiplies the meanings of words in a special manner according to its individual genius, and that this genius is not patent in the dictionaries. To translate "What is the matter?" by "*Quelle est la matière?*" "Good morning" by "*Bon matin,*" or "I am warm" by "*Je suis chaud,*" is meaningless. Yet these are instances in the writer's daily experience, and illustrate what can be done with a dictionary and the habits resulting from its use. All a student can do is to take his chance and guess.

Translation is only a result of language study, and a very unsatisfactory one at the best. As a means of study it is fatal to the most willing and the best gifted student. Each word translated is a step backward, for at the least subsequent difficulty the pupil ceases all effort to understand and only looks for the equivalent in his vernacular, whether there be one or not. Every word can be made clear, and is only made so absolutely, without translation, either by definition, by antithesis, by analogy, or, above all, by context.

From the known to the unknown, from the ensemble to the detail, are the two great principles in teaching. Through a series of skilful questions the student is brought to the new word or the new sentence as the horse to the obstacle, and, without giving him time to hesitate, the teacher prompts the new term, which afterward he incorporates into other sentences, until he is sure that the student has absorbed it. Acquired in this way, the words become as familiar to the pupil as his own language and

impress themselves deeply in the memory. The teacher ought to know how to draw and to draw quickly; the blackboard is indispensable. He must also be a good mimic, for the facts which can be represented by drawing are limited, while one can mimic almost everything. There are many other means which a real teacher soon discovers, and by which the whole vocabulary of a language can be taught, and effectively taught, without translation. Vocabulary, moreover, is, in a great measure acquired by intuition and observation. Words are not a set of disparate and arbitrary signs. They belong to families, with a head to each, and a genealogy less complicated than that of an average king. All the student needs in this respect is to be made conscious of the fact. For the rest, trust to his intelligence. Besides, language is not so much a matter of vocabulary. It is astonishing how much can be done with relatively few words, and how little sometimes with the aid of half a dozen dictionaries. Some of the greatest masterpieces are monochromes. Racine uses 1,400 words.

To teach words for their own sake is a dangerous folly which should be dealt with by the medico-legal courts. If words have any value, it is as signs of ideas, and language, being only the expression of something else, cannot be studied by itself, no more than you can draw without drawing something or somebody.

What has been already said with reference to translation is especially true regarding grammar. In its origin and in its function language is essentially intuitive, spontaneous, not rational. It is the product, not of individual initiative, but of folk-psychology, whose laws are extremely difficult to deduct and to formulate. Happily, we need not know these laws in order to follow them. No man when speaking has a conscious knowledge of the principles of speech, any more than of its organic production. And even the more he tries to be conscious of these principles, the less well he speaks. Furthermore, while in a language there is nothing arbitrary, in the strictest sense of the word, for every fact has its motive, yet there is nothing which could not be reasonably imagined to be different. The



past participle of *faire* could be *fat*. It is therefore in its *esse* rather than in its *fieri* that a language must be studied first; and this applies chiefly to grammar. Here languages differ even more than in lexicology; and translation leads to chaos. The subtle mechanism of the clearest and most logical language becomes arbitrary, incomprehensible, and false when judged by the standard of another. In order to retain its force and its dignity, a language must be isolated, and those who would learn it must do so in much the same way they learned their mother-tongue, or as the immigrant learns English when he comes to the United States. Approached in this way no language is either easy or difficult. French, German, Russian, and Chinese children learn their mother-tongue as readily as American children learn English, and so it seems that the best attitude in language study is reached by a complete abandonment of psychological analysis.

There are those who adopt half measures and proclaim that, while it is desirable to study a language from within, the student's vernacular is of great help for indispensable and time-saving explanations; they ridicule the teacher who, rather than resort to translation, devotes no little time to making clear the meaning of one word, while they could do so in the time it takes to utter the translation; they scorn the object-lesson and the blackboard, call them kindergarten devices, and are fond of saying that the reason why other teachers do not translate is because these teachers do not know the pupils' language well enough.

Taking these arguments in their order one can answer thus : (1) Explanations are not only unnecessary, but even harmful at the start, and, later, they are better given in the language studied, for then you kill two birds with one stone. (2) Remember the fable of the hare and the tortoise. (3) They do not know what the kindergarten aims at; they forget that every lesson, from the primary school to the university, ought to be an object-lesson; and they overlook the fact that any man who is not deaf and dumb can learn a number of languages, while extremely few know how to teach one. Of course, it is desirable that the teacher should know the pupil's vernacular; not, how-

ever, in order to use it as a direct means of teaching, but rather so as to enable him better to appreciate the working of the pupil's mind and to modify the lesson to his needs. When you translate, be it only a little, you change the entire attitude of the student, and that little will soon grow to be the whole.

If, therefore, you cannot teach a language without translation, burn your books and learn a trade. Bricklayers earn from three to four dollars a day; farm hands and housemaids are scarce all over the country. To conclude by a parody of Danton's famous cry, three things are necessary to learn a language: Speak it, still speak it, always speak it.

But, one may say, our purpose is not to fit our students as waiters in a cosmopolitan restaurant or as guides for Cook & Co. We are treating the matter from an educational point of view and in an academic way. Our business is to train the mind by the wholesome gymnastics of grammar and to adorn it with the gems of literature. For that a reading knowledge is sufficient. We are not a mere school of languages.

Of course, you are not; you are considerably less, and your pretended drill of the mind is farcical. Do you train your body with treatises on calisthenics or the history of sports? And what will be the moral effect if later the student discovers that he has not learned what he had a right to expect to be taught; or what if, in his youthful naïveté, he takes his achievement in linguistic studies as a standard of efficiency in other branches? As for literature, it is beyond your reach. The only gate to literature is the language, and that gate is locked to you.

Suppose even that a reading knowledge, in certain cases, were sufficient. Even then it remains true that the shortest way to enable a student to read a language is to make him speak it.

If the form is faulty or inelegant, there is ample occasion for the teacher to inform, to correct, and to polish; to give incidentally and profitably the whole body of grammar in its didactic function and based upon something real. To teach grammar differently is to lose time, and to pretend to teach the language through grammar is worse, for it is as dishonest as to sell oleomargarine under the name of butter. Simple every-day experiences

come first, but will soon be exhausted, and at that point the question arises what next to talk about, or, better, what subject or subjects to use as material for the further study and constant practice of the language. Literature, philology, and history, all closely related to language, lend themselves particularly to this use, and can easily be made vehicles of language study. In fact, they need not be clearly separated from it and from each other; the measure in which each enters into the lesson must be determined according to the maturity of the student, his taste and purpose. In general, and especially for children, history seems to be best suited. History is a series of stories, and, after all, to tell a story is the chief object of language. The most trivial experience, whether we will or not, is told in story form. Description is only a frame for the story, and lyric poetry is beyond the average student, as it is beyond the average individual. By history is not here meant a chronology of kings and presidents, nor a list of battles and of treaties. It is the revival of the past of a people in its national and social life as well as in its political career. Language, literature, art, institutions, are all logical outcomes of that past, and are intelligently studied only in the light of history. In a sense, it is correct to say that history is a more valuable auxiliary to language study than literature, which latter need not be neglected, and will in its turn profit by the study of history. Any great work is so only on condition that it is a synthetic expression of the time in which it was produced, and, it being such, he who would see its full meaning must have a clear idea of its time. Otherwise these masterpieces lose their bearing, become meaningless and even grotesque, like a madonna in a machine shop or the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum. It is madness to expect American boys and girls of the twentieth century to admire or even to understand Corneille without first, through history, learning to know why the great playwright is justly called the "sublime Corneille."

This selection of material for language study might help to solve another problem of the present school system; the relief of the program of studies. It is, indeed, a serious question how to

make room for all the subjects which our complex modern life makes it desirable for schools and colleges to teach. Our interests and knowledge are constantly increasing, while our lives are as short as were those of our forefathers. Days now have, as of old, only twenty-four hours, and there is no prospect of lengthening them. Each generation, each year, adds to the curriculum, with the result that from every country comes a cry for relief. Yet none dares to take the initiative, and the truth is that our programs are overburdened to a perilous extent. Improved methods have done and are doing much for the balance of school economy, but there is a limit to that remedy, and even now, the difficulty is greater than it has ever been. Could not some further relief be found through language study? Could the teaching of languages not be linked to such subjects as arithmetic, geography, physics, etc., etc.? In France the study of the mother-tongue is practically combined with all other studies. Each teacher is, at the same time he instructs in his own subject, a teacher of French. The results are excellent, and it would perhaps be worth while in this country to take the hint and thus remove the just cause of complaint against the wretched English used by school children and by college students. And why could not the same expedient be successfully adopted in connection with foreign languages?

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